DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 475 CS 009 698

AUTHOR Howard, Katrena C.
TITLE Influences on Teachers' Decision Making and How These Affect Reading Instruction.
PUB DATE Oct 88
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Reading Association (32nd, Atlanta, GA, October 28-30, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Classroom Research; Grade 5; Inservice Teacher Education; Intermediate Grades; Preservice Teacher Education; Qualitative Research; *Reading Instruction; Reading Teachers; *Teacher Behavior; *Teacher Characteristics; Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

A qualitative study examined teachers' classroom practices and reasons behind observed practices. Subjects, four fifth grade teachers of reading who taught in different elementary schools in a large metropolitan school district, were observed during reading class time for 10 consecutive days. A profile of each participant and her teaching style emerged from observations and data analysis. Results indicated that factors affecting curricular decisions can be placed into one of four categories: (1) the teacher; (2) materials/activities; (3) external factors; and (4) students. Results also indicated that these factors influenced the subjects in varying degrees and that subjects made curricular choices based upon their beliefs concerning those factors. Teacher preservice and inservice instruction changes are recommended, based on the results of this study. (Eighteen references are attached.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED308475

INFLUENCES ON TEACHERS' DECISION MAKING AND HOW THESE AFFECT READING INSTRUCTION

Katrena C. Howard
Research & Evaluation Department
DeKalb County School System
955 North Indian Creek Drive
Clarkston, Georgia 30021

Paper presented at the
Annual Meeting of the College Reading Association
Atlanta, Georgia
October 28-30, 1988

CS009698

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Katrena C. Howard

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

INFLUENCES ON TEACHERS' DECISION MAKING AND HOW THESE AFFECT READING INSTRUCTION

This report from a qualitative investigation focuses on teachers' classroom practices and reasons behind observed practices. Four fifth grade teachers of reading were observed for ten consecutive days during their reading classes. The process of data analysis yielded factors that influence teachers' decision making regarding reading instruction. These results will be discussed in relation to their implications for teacher educators and teacher trainers.

Need for Direct Observation

Reseachers often suggest implications for teaching without accurate knowledge of classroom practices, but some researchers stress that it is important to know what occurs in the classroom and the role of the teacher. Goodlad (1977) states that we cannot know what schools need without first knowing what they already have, nor can we know what to put into them without knowing what needs replacing.

One reason for observing instruction is that generally surveys and interviews do not accurately relate teachers' classroom practices (Rosenshine, 1978; Hook & Rosenshine, 1979). Although questionnaires can serve as sources of data, Rosenshine contends that direct observation of events within the environment is desired in order to accurately describe instructional practices.

Once classroom observations have been conducted, it is important to discover the factors that affect classroom practice. In an observational study of teachers' instruction and the writing process of kindergarten children, Moss (1985) found that the single most important influence on writing in the classroom was the instructional decision of the teacher. The two teachers in Moss' study played a major, influential role in every aspect of writing in both classrooms.

Durkin (1978-79), in her observational study of comprehension instruction, states that knowing what teachers do and what influences them is imperative if better practices are to be established. Pearson (1984) states that researchers' efforts will fall short if they fail to appreciate teachers' roles, take advantage of them as collaborators, or disregard their multifaceted characters. Furthermore, Pearson maintains that instruction and instructional ideas must be examined in the classroom with the participation of primary influence: the teacher. Realities of the classroom, Pearson claims, must be considered. These realities consist of several variables: students' diverse personalities, management, curriculum, and environmental pressures.

Duffy (1982), in his humorous and perceptive article about the realities of the classroom states:

> In short, the classroom is an incredibly complex and restrictive environment. Teachers have limited amounts of freedom and flexibility; they must routinely work within resource shortages, deal with complex (and often

> unconsciously created) social relations and fend off multiple and conflicting expectations while simultaneously putting forward the image of a cool professional who has the classroom and the children's learning under control. (p. 361)

Because of the difficulty of introspective reporting, direct observation appears to be one of the best ways to obtain a true account of instructional practices. From these observations, it is important to consider the total environment and the reasons why teachers do what they do. "To speak of composing processes without reference to the schooling which shapes it [sic] then may be to isolate an effect from its cause" (Marshall, 1984, p. 119). Observations of the classroom, the teacher, and the variables that shape and condition them need to be examined within the total classroom context.

Furthermore, Ratekin, Simpson, Alvermann, and Dishner (1985) and Alvermann (1985) contend that if recommendations do not fit existing patterns of instruction, the advice is useless to teachers. In addition, Ratekin et al. and Alvermann state that personal goals and beliefs affect teachers' choices of methods and procedures. Therefore, these researchers have provided additional evidence to support a need to examine the reasons behind teachers' instructional decisions.

PARTICIPANTS, METHODS, AND PROCEDURES

The study took place in a large metropolitan school district. Names of the school district, participants, and others mentioned in the study were either omitted or changed to protect their anonymity. The description of the school district is quite general in order to guarantee its anonymity. In operation were 74 elementary schools and 23 high schools along with special services centers, e.g. reading, special education. Student enrollment was approximately 72,000 with a racial composition of approximately 58% white and 42% black. Expenditure per pupil was $3,013.54, excluding transportation. A 26 to 1 pupil-teacher ratio was maintained in grades three through seven.

Participants

The participants were four fifth grade teachers of reading who taught in different elementary schools. In addition to teaching a reading class, the participants were responsible for teaching other subjects. They were chosen by a stratified random selection process and were willing to take part in the study.

All are experienced teachers, having taught an average of 13 years and having been at their present positions for an average of six years. Two participants held Masters degrees in education. One participant held a Bachelor of Science degree and one held a Bachelor of Arts degree. Three participants were certified in elementary education and one was certified in home economics and science.

Through the observations and data analysis, a unique profile of each participant and her teaching style emerged, along with the information significant to the focus of the study. The characteristics and teaching style of each participant are significant in a study of this type because the total context needs to be considered when analyzing and interpreting the results.

Data Collection Methods and Procedures

Observations were made of each participant or her substitute for 10 consecutive days. The participants were observed during the reading class time which ranged from 55 minutes to 1 hour and 45 minutes.

Data were collected from a survey, field notes, audio tapes, interview guides, personal conservations, phone conversations, transcripts of interviews, basal manuals, participants' lesson plans, and material collected at the Writing Center. Primary data sources were observer field notes and participant interviews. Field notes were made on the right side of the page leaving a three-inch margin to allow room for coding notes later. Also, for ease of coding and legibility spaces were left between incidents. Field notes were made during the observations. As soon as possible after each observation, the researcher listened to the audio tapes. Listening to the tapes was done initially for two purposes. The first was to ensure the thoroughness and accuracy of the field notes. The second was to extract quotations that appeared significant. Interestingly,

another even more significant purpose evolved when reviewing the tapes. The review provided the researcher with an opportunity to reexperience and rethink the situation. Thus, by reviewing the tapes, an additional interaction with the situation and an opportunity to create and develop tentative categories occurred. From these tentative categories, subsequent information was categorized and took shape.

Because the participants were provided with verification copies of the field notes throughout the data collection period, no observer comments were made in the field notes. Field notes reflected only what had transpired in the classroom. Observer comments, however, that reflected impressions, ideas, and any thoughts the observer had about what occurred were entered in the same note pad by turning up the bottom right corner of one of the back pages, allowing the observer to flip easily and quickly to that page.

Analysis of the Data

Field Notes and Interviews

Some data analysis occurred as data were collected. As the data were collected and reviewed, the constant comparison method was used to aggregate inductively and synthesize the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Tentative categories were generated, as were ideas about the meaning of the information, which is termed theoretical memoing (Glaser, 1978). Field notes and participant interviews were the primary sources for the generation of categories. Data from other sources were used for triangulation.

For the purpose of reliability, participating teachers were asked to look over the notes for accuracy and completeness. In each and every case, the participants verified the accuracy of the field notes.

During the initial stages of analysis, only data that seemed relevant to the research questions were coded. Later, however, in an attempt to ensure that the total context be scrutinized and seemingly unrelated variables be considered, all incidents were coded. The coding of all incidents was done after all of the data were collected. Although this was time consuming, it allowed relationships between the total context to emerge. In addition, when coding all of the incidents, a unique profile of each participant developed.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Karla - Case Study 1

The majority of Karla's reading class time was spent on introducing the story and checking workbook pages. Karla expected students to work independently and not to interrupt her as she worked with other students. While checking students' work, Karla seemed primarily interested in a correct answer and did not seem to diagnose weak areas from problems students encountered.

Karla apparently believed that she was expected to accomplish more than was humanly possible. She stated that requirements from the school district and the Reading Center

limited what she could do and the time she had to do it. In addition, having two reading groups instead of just one was difficult and affected her reading curriculum choices.

Most significant in affecting Karla's reading instruction was her belief that she was required to have students complete the level by the end of the quarter. Also significant is that while skipping stories, Karla assigned all of the workbook's skill activities and the review sheets for the end of level tests. This strongly indicates that Karla's reading curriculum was not only determined by her beliefs about district policy, but by the end of level tests.

Evelyn - Case Study 2

Evelyn was an astute and conscientious teacher who constantly assessed her students' progress. She seemed cognizant of her students' capabilities and aided them in learning how to learn by seizing opportunities for teaching when difficulties arose. Evelyn was well-prepared each day and referred to the teacher's manual infrequently. Even though she did not rely on the suggestions made by the teacher's manual, she seemed to feel confident that she covered necessary material and asked appropriate questions. She said that when she looked over the end of level test, she remembered the areas where students had difficulty and zeroed in on those.

Evelyn spent the majority of reading class time on reading the basal stories orally. Oral reading was a priority because Evelyn believed it to be helpful in diagnosing weak areas.

Evelyn did not seem to appear pressured or rushed to have the students tested by a certain time. The observations occurred at the beginning of a quarter and one of her reading groups spent its class time in reviewing for the end of level test. When questioned if she had to have them tested by a certain date, Evelyn replied that she was required to test "just whenever they [students] finished the level, and this did not have to be done by the end of the quarter.

Although Evelyn was an efficient and well-organized teacher, factors unrelated to reading instruction (students leaving the classroom, preparing the Christmas door decoration, the "lice patrol") affected the amount of time that could be utilized for instruction. These factors interrupted reading instruction and were the realities of the classroom.

Karen - Case Study 3

Karen was well prepared and well organized each day during the observations. The majority of class time was spent on building vocabulary concepts. When working with a group of students, Karen introduced the story, checked activities, and recorded grades. Assignments were repeated several times.

Though generally accepting of students' responses, Karen wanted students to provide answers like those in the teacher's manual. Karen did not appear to diagnose students' difficulties from incorrect responses. Furthermore, she made no attempt to remediate areas where students had performed poorly.

Karen reported that she did not feel pushed to finish a certain number of reading levels. She explained that with so many students going to different labs during the reading period, she often could not get finished with assignments, and students would have to finish their reading work later in the afternoon. Yet Karen did not take advantage of the available time at the end of the period to work with the few students who remained after the others had gone to reading and math labs. Also, although the time was scheduled for language arts, no integration occurred between the subjects of reading, spelling, or English; they remained separate.

Several factors beyond Karen's control affected her instruction. Minor interruptions occurred regularly and other interruptions such as Karen's workday absence occurred occasionally. It is significant that Karen's reading and math labs were scheduled during the language arts period, so that these activities had to be shifted to later in the day.

Sarah - Case Study 4

Sarah was well prepared and organized each day, although some unnecessary time was wasted in the movement of groups to Sarah's table. Sarah referred to the teachers' manual frequently and based her instruction on the suggestions contained there. Much of class was devoted to skill development through the use of workbooks, practice masters, review sheets, and exercises on the chalkboard, overhead, and chart paper.

The reason Sarah gave her students for doing a particular skill activity was that it would be on the end of level test. This would indicate that Sarah was primarily interested in the end product, not in relating to her students how a skill could be used to develop reading abilities.

Factors beyond Sarah's control affected her instruction. A large number of students and teachers were contained in one space with no walls to reduce noise. Interruptions of the daily routine certainly limited the time that could be used for instruction. Most significant was Sarah's three days of absence in which planned, routine instruction did not occur.

Discussion

During data analysis, major factors affecting participants' curricular decisions emerged. The factors were placed into the following four categories: (1) the teacher, (2) materials/ activities, (3) external factors, (4) students. Although the participants used the curriculum guides and basal reading materials, their curricular choices and classroom practices were quite different. It is important to identify the existence of these factors and their influence on teacher decision making regarding reading instruction.

Teacher

Participants' beliefs about instruction seem to be most significant and seem to explain the reasons for many of their curricular decisions. Beliefs about what needed to be done were

reflected in participants' instructional emphasis. The factors that emerged (teacher, materials/activities, external factors, and students) were all related to the participants' beliefs.

Materials/Activities

Three of the participants used the district's adopted basal reading series exclusively. These three participants relied heavily on the basal, emphasizing skills and the importance of the end of level test. One participant used a supplementary basal reading series and indicated that she had used other materials in the past. Nevertheless, she too indicated that she knew the skills assessed on the end of level test and focused her instruction accordingly. The reliance and indiscriminate use of commercial materials supports findings by Durkin 1978-79; 1984; Rosecky, 1978; Shannon, 1982; and Mason, 1983. The influence of tests in determining curriculum was reported by Jacoby (1984) and Van Nostrand, Pettigrew, and Shaw (1980).

External Factors

There were many factors which were beyond the participants' control. Yet the participants' beliefs about these external factors are significant in making decisions. For example, one participant omitted stories because she believed that she must have her students tested by the end of the quarter, when, in fact, she did not. Other external factors included district guidelines, students being pulled out or brought into class, assemblies, and absences. Similar factors were discussed by Duffy (1982) and Pearson (1984).

Students

Participants' beliefs about their students were of practical significance. The observations revealed that two of the participants believed that some of their students required little instruction; therefore, the students were expected to work independently with little teacher direction. One participant did not want her students to experience frustrations similar to those she had encountered. Yet the observations revealed that she was teaching in much the same way that she reported being taught.

Summary, Implications, and Recommendations

The purpose of this report was to relate findings from a qualitative study that identified classroom practices and the reasons for teachers' decision making regarding reading instruction. The participants in the study were four fifth grade teachers of reading who taught in a large suburban school district.

Participants and their reading classes were observed for 10 consecutive days. Qualitative research methods were used in the collection of data in the form of a survey, field notes, audio tapes, interview guides, personal conversations, and telephone conversations. Primary data sources were observer field notes and transcripts of participants' interview responses. In addition, basal reader teachers' manuals, participants' lesson plans, and other materials used during the observations were examined. The constant comparison method was used to inductively aggregate and synthesize the data.

Through the process of developing and refining the categories, major factors affecting curricular decisions emerged. These factors were placed into the following four categories: the teacher, materials/activities, external factors, and students. These factors influenced the participants in varying degrees. It is apparent, however, that the participants made curricular choices based upon their beliefs concerning the above mentioned factors. It is imperative, then, that when making recommendations to teachers, both in preservice courses and inservice programs, teacher educators need to be aware of these factors that control the reading curriculum.

As with most qualitative studies, this report raises more questions than it answers. Teachers are continually inundated with new ideas for teaching strategies and methods. Certainly an emphasis on writing, cooperative learning, learning or reading styles is positive and essential to educational progress. For teacher educators, the main question is: In what ways can teacher preservice and inservice instruction change to better accommodate the realities of the reading classroom?. With this question in mind, certain recomendations can be made:

1. Because teachers' beliefs strongly influence their writing instruction or lack of it, investigations that attempt to identify teachers' beliefs and reasons behind them might be valuable when making recommendations for curriculum development and/or classroom practice. As was pointed out by Ratekin, et al. (1985) and Alvermann (1985), recommendations

need to fit existing patterns of instruction for the gap between theory and practice to diminish.

2. Before recommending instructional methods and techniques, researchers would benefit from investigating current classroom practices in order to determine the feasibility of their recommendations.
3. If teachers are to be expected to incorporate certain strategies into the reading classroom, current conditions must change. Teacher educators and school personnel need to (a) show teachers how the strategy will help students to become better readers, (b) expect that teachers will teach the strategy (c) test the strategy, and (d) provide time for the strategy (e) provide follow-up and support. To change teachers' practices, one must change their beliefs.
4. A need exists for preservice courses and inservice programs that demonstrate how teachers can assess student needs and plan instruction accordingly.
5. More complete and consistent communication between the school district and its teachers would reduce some apparent misconceptions.
6. Publishers and authors of basal reading series need to be aware that, oftentimes, the tested items become the reading curriculum.

References

Alvermann, D.E. (1985). Conflict in curricular perceptions: Barrier to effective professional development in reading? The Journal of Reading Education, 10, 1-9.

Duffy, G. G. (1982). Fighting off the alligators: What research in real classrooms has to say about reading instruction. Journal of Reading Behavior, 14, 357-373.

Durkin, D. (1978-1979). What classroom observations reveal about reading comprehension instruction. Reading Research Quarterly, 4, 481-533.

Durkin, D. (1984). Is there a match between what elementary teachers do and what basal readers recommend? The Reading Teacher, 37, 734-745.

Glaser, B. G. (1978). Theoretical sensitivity. Mill Valley, CA: The Sociology Press.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.

Goodlad, J. (1977). What goes on in our schools. Educational Researcher, 6, 3-6.

Hook, C. M., & Rosenshine, B. V. (1979). Accuracy of teacher reports of their classroom behavior. Review of Educational Research, 49, 1-11.

Jacoby, A. Z. (1984). An investigation of the historical backgrounds of elementary school classroom teachers concerning written composition and its effects on curricular decisions and teaching concerning writing--a case study (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1984). Dissertation Abstracts International, 45, 1703A.

Marshall, J. (1984). Schooling and the composing process. In A. N. Applebee (Ed.), Contents for learning to write: Studies of secondary school instruction. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Mason, J. (1983, June). There's a snopes in the schoolhouse--He's teaching reading. EPIEgram, p. 1.

Moss, R. K. (1985). Transactions among teachers and children: Teachers' instruction and the writing process of kindergarten children (Report No. CS 208 891). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 258 188)

Pearson, P. D. (Ed.). (1984). Handbook of reading research. New York: Longman.

Ratekin, N., Simpson, M. L., Alvermann, D. E., & Dishner, E. K. (1985). Why teachers resist content reading instruction. Journal of Reading, 28, 432-437.

Rosecky, M. (1978). Are teachers selective when using basal guidebooks? The Reading Teacher, 32, 381-384.

Rosenshine, B. V. (1978). Academic engaged time, content covered and direct instruction. Journal of Education, 160, 38-66.

Shannon, P. (1982). Some subjective reasons for teacher's reliance on commercial reading materials. The Reading Teacher, 35, 884-889.

Van Nostrand, A. D., Pettigrew, J., & Shaw, R. A. (1980). Writing instruction in the elementary grades: Deriving a model by collaborative research. (Report No. CS 206 468). Providence, RI: Center for Research in Writing. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 203 378)